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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the School Management Initiative that Hong Kong implemented in 1991. It discusses some of the difficulties encountered by school teachers as they tried to implement annual school plans and also describes some of the useful techniques that were introduced into schools. They key problems identified in schools included the absence of a clear school vision, teachers who were not familiar with the proper techniques in writing planning documents, teachers who were inexperienced in implementing the specifics of their planning documents, the presence of a dominant top-down culture, and teachers who struggled with heavy workloads. The report advises schools to formulate a school vision using a shared-decision approach to guide plan development so as to gain the teachers' commitment. It also suggests that schools alleviate teacher's workload, offer a school-based staff-development program on writing and implementing a school plan, organize regular visits by external consultants to support teachers, encourage all schools to review their plans regularly, foster the development of a shared decision-making culture, adopt a teamwork approach, and convince principals to delegate authority to school teachers and provide more resources. (Contains 11 references.) (RJM)

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Implementation of Annual School Plan in Hong Kong: Problems and Coping Strategies

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Implementation of Annual School Plan in Hong Kong: Problems and Coping Strategies

Abstract

Hong Kong adopted the principles of School-based Management (SBM) as a basis for initiating its project of "School Management Initiative" (SMI) in 1991. It started with 34 schools in the first two years and imposed the SBM scheme in all primary and secondary schools, a total of around 1200 schools, in year 2000. An essential feature of the scheme is the requirement of all schools to produce an Annual School Plan to guide its activities during the year so as to ensure more systematic planning and evaluation of programs of activities in schools and to report their performance. Since there are not many in-service staff development activities available in the area of planning as arranged by the Government, many schools have approached tertiary academics for assistance. The author has been invited to provide related consultancy services in many primary and secondary schools since 1998. A postal survey was carried out in late 2001 to identify a number of issues related to the implementation of annual school plans in Hong Kong primary and secondary schools. A total of 1,251 questionnaires filled in by teachers were collected from 36 primary and 27 secondary schools. This paper presents some of the difficulties encountered by school teachers in their writing up and implementation of annual school plans as identified through the author's consultancy work and the written responses in the questionnaires, and describes some useful techniques introduced to schools that were being practised and found to be useful. The key problems identified in schools included: (1) lacking of a clear school vision; (2) teachers were not familiar with the proper techniques of writing planning documents; (3) most of the teachers were inexperienced in the implementation of the specifics of their planning documents; (4) few teachers had successful experience of implementing a school plan; (5) presence of a dominant top-down culture; and (6) teachers in general had heavy workload. Schools were advised to adopt the following strategies to solve their problems: (1) formulate the school vision using a shared-decision approach to guide the development of their school plans so as to gain the teachers' commitment; (2) alleviate the workload of teachers by identifying and eliminating non-essential duties; (3) offer a school-based staff development programme on 'how to write and implement a school plan', with particular focus on the writing of appropriate performance indicators with successful criteria for objectives, monitoring techniques,

checking the usefulness of strategies adopted and whether objectives set have been achieved.; (4) organize regular visits by external consultants to schools to support teachers in the formulation and implementation of their school plans; (5) encourage schools to review their plans and actions regularly and to adopt the concept of flexibility in the implementation of the annual school plans; (6) foster the development of a shared-decision making culture in school; (7) adopt team work approach; (8) convince the principals to delegate authority to school teachers and provide more resources for them. However, it usually takes one planning cycle (one year) of experience together with proper staff training and guidance before school teachers really get the confidence of implementing school planning.

Implementation of Annual School Plan in Hong Kong:
Problems and Coping Strategies

Background

Since the early 1980s there have been a lot of efforts to reform schools in developed countries so as to improve their performance. Delegation of authority from system to schools is the main theme of all these changes. In general, the term school-based management is widely used. In many places of the USA, Britain and Australia, the writing of a school plan is a mandated requirement along with the development of school-based management. Very often, detailed guidelines were given to ensure the quality of the planning process and the writing up of the documents. The requirement of writing school plan is usually for accountability purpose to ensure the proper use of authority delegated and school funding received from the government. The other purpose, which is of equal importance, is to provide a formal mechanism for school improvement or maintaining school effectiveness.

Mintrop, MacLellan and Quintero (2001) indicated that school improvement plans have been widely used for the improvement of school performance in the States. Schools are required to state in an unambiguous way the activities that they have to do. The use of school planning in such a top-down compulsory way is because schools have to be accountable to the system authority for what they are doing, especially if they are not performing up to the specified standard of the system authority. However, the effectiveness of school planning for internal school development and improvement of teaching and learning have been queried by some researchers (Conley, 1993). Many researchers have criticized and are doubtful of the effectiveness of using systematic planned approach in school for improvement if it is used in a linear rational approach without flexibility and quick concerns to changes in the environment (Louis, Toole and Hargreaves, 1999). However, many school administrators still believe that well planned and organized school activities are essential to the success of a school. It is only an issue of how to do it right and effectively.

Hong Kong adopted the principles of School-based Management (SBM) as the key concept for initiating its project of "School Management Initiative" (SMI) in 1991 (Education and Manpower Branch and Education Department, Hong Kong, 1991). It started with 34 schools in the first two years. Since then, gradually, there were

many secondary and primary schools joined the scheme. In 2000, the government imposed that all the remaining primary and secondary schools in Hong Kong had to join the SBM scheme, ending up with a situation that all the 1200 schools in Hong Kong are now operating under the SBM concepts. An essential feature of the scheme is the requirement of all schools to produce an Annual School Plan to guide its activities during the year so as to ensure more systematic planning and evaluation of programs of activities in schools and to report their performance. There is a strong believe that schools could make use of systematic planning to improve their performance. The theoretical framework developed by Caldwell and Spinks (1988) was used as the guiding principle for the work of planning (Education and Manpower Bureau and Education Department, Hong Kong, 1991). One of the recent compulsory schemes of asking all schools to develop school plans was introduced in Ireland after their Education Act of 1998 was passed (McNamara, O'Hara and Ni Aingleis, 2002).

Since most of the school teachers in Hong Kong have not been trained the theoretical and technical aspects of planning in their pre-service or professional training, and there are not many in-service staff development activities available in the area of planning as arranged by the Government, many schools have approached tertiary academics for assistance so as to facilitate their teachers to master the concepts and techniques of planning. In that way, teachers are able to make appropriate and effective changes to improve the effectiveness of their schools through systematic planning of school activities.

The Consultancy Studies

There are around 800 primary schools and 400 secondary schools in Hong Kong, with a total of around just less than one million students. The total number of school teachers is around forty-four thousand. It is surely not an easy task to provide sufficient number of staff development programmes from the central government for the huge population of school teachers. Although the Education Department in Hong Kong has published a number of documents to assist school teachers to cope with the new initiative of school-based management, nevertheless, a lot of them failed to grasp the basic techniques of planning to handle the compulsory task of writing an annual school plan and reporting the outcomes as well. Many school principals have therefore approached universities to identify suitable academics to provide training and consultancy services for their teachers. The common types of requests from

schools include: (1) to organize a training programme, usually with a duration of two to three whole days, for school teachers to teach them how to write school plans, including the basic concepts and all the techniques required; (2) to check on the documents of their annual school plans and provide advice for improvement; and (3) to work with teachers for a year to assist them to implement the plans and evaluate the results.

The author has been invited to provide consultancy services in many primary and secondary schools, and up to early 2002 has served a total of six secondary schools and eleven primary schools since 1998 to assist teachers to manage the task of writing annual school plans. The types of services that have been provided to schools included all the three main categories as mentioned in the previous paragraph. All the annual school plans of these schools have been reviewed. In three secondary schools and one primary school, the author has also followed up the work of implementation and regular review of their planning processes during the academic year. A lot of direct contacts with teachers were made. Each of the six secondary schools had around 60 teachers, while the primary schools had around 40. Hence, the author had been able to discuss with a total of around 700 teachers, either in groups or individually in the past four years.

Postal Survey

A postal survey was carried out in late 2001 to identify a number of issues related to the implementation of annual school plans in Hong Kong primary and secondary schools. Questionnaires were sent to 55 primary and 55 secondary schools. A total of 1,251 questionnaires filled in by teachers were collected from 36 primary and 27 secondary schools, 774 and 477 from primary and secondary respectively. The questionnaire contained a number of items to identify the factors possibly relating to effective planning, and an open-ended section for teachers to write down their comments on the implementation of annual school plans in their schools. A total of 207 written responses were collected.

This paper presents some of the difficulties encountered by school teachers in their writing up and implementation of annual school plans as identified through the author's consultancy work and the written responses in the questionnaires, and describes some useful techniques introduced to schools that were being practised and found to be useful.

Problems Encountered by School Teachers

The Education Department of the Hong Kong Government has indicated clearly the format of an annual school plan, specifying the basic components required. They are: (1) aims and values of the school; (2) review of previous year's performance; (3) objectives of the school; (4) the external environment; (5) the internal environment; (6) activity plans of individual units; (7) overall school budget; (8) management arrangements; and (9) evaluation arrangements (with performance indicators) (Education and Manpower Branch and Education Department, Hong Kong, 1991). The activity plans are the basic sub-units of the annual school plan, putting down the details of the delivery of different school subject curricula and the implementation of other school functions such as the management of school discipline, counselling work, organization of extra-curricular activities, promotion of library activities, career guidance, and home-school cooperation issues, etc. All the activity plans should be in line with the official school aims and objectives.

It was found that the most common difficulty as reviewed by looking at the school planning documents of the six secondary and eleven primary schools was that many teachers were lack of formal training in this aspect. Most of them were inexperienced in the implementation of an annual school plan and very few had successful working experience of school planning. It was reasonable; otherwise, the schools would not have approached the author for assistance. Many teachers thought that doing planning was just a common sense. Hence, a lot of the annual school plans were incomplete lacking a lot of key information such as performance indicators and Gantt Charts. The works of teachers as mainly directed by the activity plans were in some cases quite diverted from the objectives of the schools. It was difficult for outsiders to comprehend the messages that the teachers wanted to put forward in their planning documents or the arrangement of activities that they had planned to do. This raised a serious problem in terms of accountability to external stakeholders. Many teachers did not put down the successful levels or criteria of their planning objectives, and very often they were evaluating the strategies used to achieve the objectives rather than the objectives originally set. And in some cases, the objectives of activity plans were not written in a clear and measurable way.

Usually there were too many objectives set and were not arranged in order of priority. That might be a reason why there were a lot of complaints against the issue

of writing an annual school plan on top of their existing workload. Also, it was interesting to find that some teachers used to do certain activities repeatedly year after year without checking whether it was necessary to do so. They failed to identify the thrusts of the school year. No wonder, the already existing issue of heavy workload due to the large student to teacher ratio in the classroom (35 to 1 in primary school and 40 - 44 to 1 in secondary school) was further intensified. This alerted the author of the issue of whether the teachers were aware of their school vision and yearly concerns which were clearly indicated by the Government as an important feature of an annual school plan in the guidelines to schools. Further discussions with some teachers reviewed that many of them had not taken part in the formulation of their school vision and they did not have a strong sense of ownership too. As the practice of writing an annual school plan was only required after the schools had joined the school-based management scheme, there was a strong sense of top-down direction to do so. The atmosphere in many schools did not foster teachers to commit into the planning process. This might be a reason why some teachers in some occasions claimed that school planning could not improve the performance of a school.

Another important issue identified was that many teachers could not write appropriate and relevant strategies for the pursuit of a certain objective. They knew what needs to be done, but did not know well how to do it. This showed that they needed to upgrade their professional knowledge in their academic subject areas or other working areas.

From the postal survey, a total of 207 written responses on the implementation of annual school plans were collected. These responses were collated and tabulated in Tables 1 and 2.

[insert Tables 1 and 2 here]

As shown in the quantified qualitative data, there was quite a high percentage of teachers yet showed no confidence in or had not perceived the positive outcomes of the school planning exercise as in late 2001. However, it was also worth noting that there was a significant amount of written responses indicated that the introduction of annual school plan in schools was feasible. Workload was a serious concern from the teachers and some of them had indicated the presence of work stress as well. The next important issue reviewed was the insufficient participation by teachers in the planning process. This surely would have affected the commitment of teachers

towards the annual school plan, and might have caused a lot of problems afterwards. Some teachers had also mentioned that the direction of the schools was not clear, and it was also difficulty to evaluate the objectives in the school plans. The need of flexibility in terms of implementing the aspects of school plans was a factor mentioned by teachers to be worth paying attention to. Other issues found included that school principal was perceived to be a crucial person to the success of implementation of school plans, and there was insufficient resources for the implementation of the school plans or the allocation of resources was not properly done.

The results obtained from the analyses of the written responses supported the observations of the author gathered from his consultancy work, and in general, they were very similar.

Solutions Suggested for Improvement

With reference to the difficulties identified in the planning documents and the concerns as raised by the teachers during the meetings, group discussions and individual interviews, etc., and based on the literature and the author's personal experience in this area and information gathered from previous rounds of successful cases in consultancy works, some suggestions were made to the school principals and teachers for the improvement of their work on the formulation and implementation of their annual school plans.

Schools were advised to adopt the following strategies to solve their problems: (1) formulate the school vision using a shared-decision approach to guide the development of their school plans so as to gain the teachers' commitment; (2) alleviate the workload of teachers by identifying and eliminating non-essential duties; (3) offer a school-based staff development programme on 'how to write and implement a school plan', with particular focus on the writing of appropriate performance indicators with successful criteria for objectives, monitoring techniques, checking the usefulness of strategies adopted and whether objectives set have been achieved.; (4) organize regular visits by external consultants to schools to support teachers in the formulation and implementation of their school plans; (5) encourage schools to review their plans and actions regularly and to adopt the concept of flexibility in the implementation of the annual school plans; (6) foster the development of a shared-decision making culture in school; (7) adopt team work

approach; (8) convince the principals to delegate authority to school teachers and provide more resources for them. However, it usually takes at least one planning cycle (one year) of experience together with proper staff training and guidance before school teachers can really get the confidence of implementing school planning.

The use of the approach of rational planning in many school improvement movements is common (Mintrop, et al., 2001). This approach assumes the availability of a stable environment (Adams, 1991). However, its applicability, and hence its effectiveness, in the nowadays ever changing school environment is problematic (Wallace, 1991; Wong, Sharpe and McCormick, 1998). A more flexible planning approach is hence advocated in many studies (Wallace, 1991; Webster, 1985; Wong, et al., 1998.). Hence, this concept was introduced to the schools as well.

Discussion

From the experience of the author gained so far in this type of work, the most effective method is to provide a relevant training programme for teachers as early as possible and then review their work of writing up the annual school plans, and to follow up the implementation of the annual school plan for at least one cycle. In that way, school teachers would be able to master their planning techniques in a more formal and effective way and make real changes in schools for improvement. Also, teachers in the same school would share their knowledge developed in the area of school planning among themselves during their daily implementation of the school plans.

School-based professional support, either through an external agent or an internal person of a school, is essential to assist a school to make full use of school plan as a proper tool for the improvement of school effectiveness, otherwise, school plan will, in the existing context, likely become a monster that results in tremendous amount of rhetoric work in many schools for apparent accountability and not for the ultimate benefit of fostering students to learn.

It is also worth mentioning that such a practice of doing consultancy work for schools in Hong Kong is a good example of collaboration between tertiary academic staff with teachers in primary and secondary schools. In line with what Elliott (2001) has indicated as 'practical theory' and 'new professionalism', the author and the school teachers have managed to derive a pool of knowledge of effective planning

strategies in schools, i.e., a practical theory of school-based planning, that informs what works in the Hong Kong school context. The knowledge is then transferred to other school settings through subsequent either school-based support services to be provided by the author as a consultant, or by those experienced teachers sharing their knowledge with teachers from different schools in other occasions (an example of 'new professionalism').

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Table 1: General written feedback received from the 1,251 questionnaires relating to the implementation of annual school plan.

No.	Opinions	Frequency of written response	Percentage
1.	Rhetoric task for submission to the Education Department	19	9.18%
2.	Too much workload	18	8.70%
3.	The plans could be implemented as planned	16	7.73%
4.	Not effective in raising the academic standards of students	15	7.25%
5.	Not effective as expected	14	6.76%
6.	Increased work stress	13	6.28%
7.	Too much paper work	12	5.80%
8.	Insufficient participation by teachers	10	4.83%
9.	Too much details	10	4.83%
10.	Schools did not have sufficient transparency	9	4.35%
11.	Caused human resources problem	8	3.86%
12.	Had taken away the time for lesson preparation	8	3.86%
13.	Teachers need to be flexible	8	3.86%
14.	Schools did not have clear direction for guidance	7	3.38%
15.	Too many things to do to guarantee quality work	7	3.38%
16.	School principals were the key factor for success	6	2.90%
17.	Difficult to evaluate the achievement of objectives	5	2.42%
18.	Insufficient resources and not fair distribution	4	1.93%
19.	The school plans ensured many more activities for students	4	1.93%
20.	Insufficient manpower	3	1.45%
21.	The plans had ended up with too many activities	3	1.45%
22.	Distribution of workload was not fair	2	0.97%
23.	Ideas were not being accepted	2	0.97%
24.	Change in personnel caused problem	1	0.48%
25.	Distribution of workload should not be done alone by the school authority	1	0.48%
26.	Parents and students were not involved	1	0.48%
27.	Too much transparency to the external parties	1	0.48%
	Total :	207	100%

Table 2: Planning issues as identified from the 207 written responses

No.	Planning Issues	Percentage of written response
1.	Showed no confidence in and/or did not have perceived the effectiveness of annual school plans	*23.19%*
2.	Had found that the introduction of annual school plans was feasible.	*9.66%*
3.	Factors that had been identified to affect the implementation of annual school plans:	
	i. Had found and/or perceived that after the introduction of annual school plans the ***workload*** of teachers had increased a lot and in some cases had caused work stress.	40.58%
	ii. There was ***insufficient participation*** by teachers, parents and students	11.11%
	iii. Teachers should be more ***flexible***.	3.86%
	iv. The ***direction of the schools*** was not clear.	3.38%
	v. The ***school principal***s were crucial to the successful of implementation.	2.9%
	vi. The ***evaluation of objectives*** was difficult.	2.42%
	vii. There was ***insufficient or improper allocation of resources*** to support the implementation.	1.93%
4.	Not classified	0.97%
	Total:	100%

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